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SUBJECT: TURKEY GETS A DATE FROM THE EU, ISTANBUL REACTS

1. (u) Summary: The December 17 EU decision to begin membership negotiations with Turkey in October 2005 was greeted in Istanbul with a mixture of relieved satisfaction and lingering skepticism. Following the initial euphoria after the decision was announced, some Turks in academic circles already have begun to air their concerns and reservations about the qualifying language and conditions. Others, meanwhile, recognize the need to begin preparing for a long and difficult negotiating process and to downplay public expectations for what EU membership will mean for Turkey. End Summary.

"Full Membership" or Nothing At All...

2. (sbu) Frustrated by decades of rejection and a sense of having been wronged on the Cyprus issue, many we spoke to in the days leading up to the December 17 decision were prepared to reject anything other than a "fair" invitation. Istanbul Municipal Housing Construction Director Ismet Yildirim, who claims to be close to the Prime Minister, openly told poloff that he hoped the offer would be rejected. "What do we need the EU for anyway?" he added. Even some secular types who have long supported EU membership and opposed the ruling AKP admitted that they would fully support PM Erdogan if he felt compelled to reject a sub-standard offer. Views here seem to have been influenced by the ruling AKP's tough rhetoric in the weeks before December 17. Asked what would constitute a "fair" invitation, Turks here listed: 1) a specific starting date for negotiations in 2005; 2) negotiations for "full" membership, not some sort of special status or restricted membership; and 3) no preconditions on Cyprus. Cyprus, in particular, seems to have been the most emotional issue. Educated Turks here invariably conceded that Turkey would "eventually" have to recognize Cyprus if it hoped to join the EU as a fellow member, but none of them was willing to accept such recognition as a pre-condition for negotiations.

Exasperation and Suspicion Make (Some) Room for Euphoria, Pride, Relief

3. (u) Following the initial euphoric reaction to the decision, we engaged a range of contacts for their views. Despite some qualifying language in the text of the decision and ongoing debate in academic circles, those we spoke with by and large accepted the December 17 decision as a victory for Turkey and the AKP government. Even those who voted against AKP in the November 2002 elections admitted that they never would have imagined that AKP could deliver on their EU promises. Cigdem Nas, a professor at the EU Institute of Marmara University, told poloff that the decision was not a surprise, but merely the latest step in a process that has lasted over 40 years and left most Turks with "EU fatigue." Exasperated by the process, Turks here nevertheless feel relieved and proud that Turkey is finally on the verge of beginning negotiations. They have suspected for years that the EU has been leading them on and raising the bar; many believed that this day would never come. Despite the decision, in fact, suspicion remains. Many are still convinced the EU will use Cyprus, negotiatin delays, or some other means to prevent Turkey fom ever joining the EU.

A Pyrrhic Victory of ou Minds?

4. (u) Such suspicions continue to fuel debate amongst more informed observers over wheter the decision was a victory at all. Noting that he was saddened by the inappropriate "carnival" atmosphere that greeted the decision and deeply worried about some of the qualifying language and conditions (particularly on Cyprus), former ANAP FM Bozer told a Kadir Has University audience that "it was a victory of our minds, but not our hearts." Can Baydaroglu, former VP of the Turkey-Europe Foundation, echoed Bozer's concerns, specifically singling out the onerous new requirements that the 31 EU chapters be negotiated sequentially (rather than simultaneously) and that the EU Council separately approve the closing of each chapter. Although the government has promised to restart the Cyprus negotiations, few here are hopeful that a solution can be found before Turkey is due to begin negotiations in October 2005. An NTV journalist summed up a widely-shared view when she remarked that "what little leverage there was on the Greek Cypriots was lost when the EU accepted them as a candidate at the 2002 Copenhagen Summit." Opinions differ, however, on whether Turkey should sign the

Ankara Protocol (thereby implicitly recognizing Cyprus) in the absence of an agreement, even if failure to do so would jeopardize Turkey's EU prospects.

Preparing for the Tough Slog Ahead

15. (sbu) Even as Ankara puts together its negotiating team, several Istanbul universities and NGOs are planning conferences and public awareness campaigns to prepare Turkish public opinion for the negotiation process. Former Finance Minister and Turkey-Europe Foundation President Ziya Muezzinoglu admitted to poloff that the negotiations will be difficult and that several groups in Turkey will suffer as a result. While Muezzinoglu and others have argued to us that Turkey has a head-start given its participation in the EU Customs Union, most admit that Turkey will have difficulty in negotiations on several chapters, especially agriculture, finance, environment, and free movement of people. Cigdem Nas remarked that the EU is also likely to become a scapegoat on a range of subjects, even though many of the reforms would have been necessary in any case. Nationalists and other groups opposed to EU membership have already indicated to us that they will take advantage of this difficult transitional period to push for a "Eurasian" or Middle East alternative. Yusuf Cevahir, VP of the MUSIAD business association and Chairman of the Cevahir Group, for example, lamented to poloff the economic opportunities that Turkey would forego by choosing the EU over expanded ties with the Middle East.

Are We Worthy?

16. (u) Oddly, even as Turks here take pride in finally getting a negotiation date, there is a strong sense among some Istanbul Turks of all social classes that Turkey does not actually "deserve" to be in the EU. Few would admit it openly to foreigners, but amongst themselves many Turks here strongly doubt whether their country will ever develop to the level of EU norms. They constantly cite excessive traffic, the poor state of roads, petty corruption, sub-standard public services, even bad manners and a penchant for doing things at the last minute as examples of how Turkey is not ready to join the EU. "How are we ever going to be in Europe with this?" has become a common refrain for frustrated Turks throughout Istanbul. We overheard a taxi driver remark recently, "Look at this (traffic)! If they let us in, we'll just screw up the whole EU."

17. (sbu) Comment: As the initial euphoria wears off, there is a growing sense here that December 17 was not the finish line, but merely another (albeit large) obstacle on the long road to EU membership. Cyprus still looms large as a potential deal-breaker if a comprehensive, or at least face-saving solution, can't be found by next October. Many here continue to suspect, moreover, that the EU will forever dangle membership as an unattainable "carrot" to motivate Turkish good behavior. Nevertheless, Turks here have now begun to focus on the difficult negotiations ahead and the equally difficult task of managing the Turkish public's expectations during the process.

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